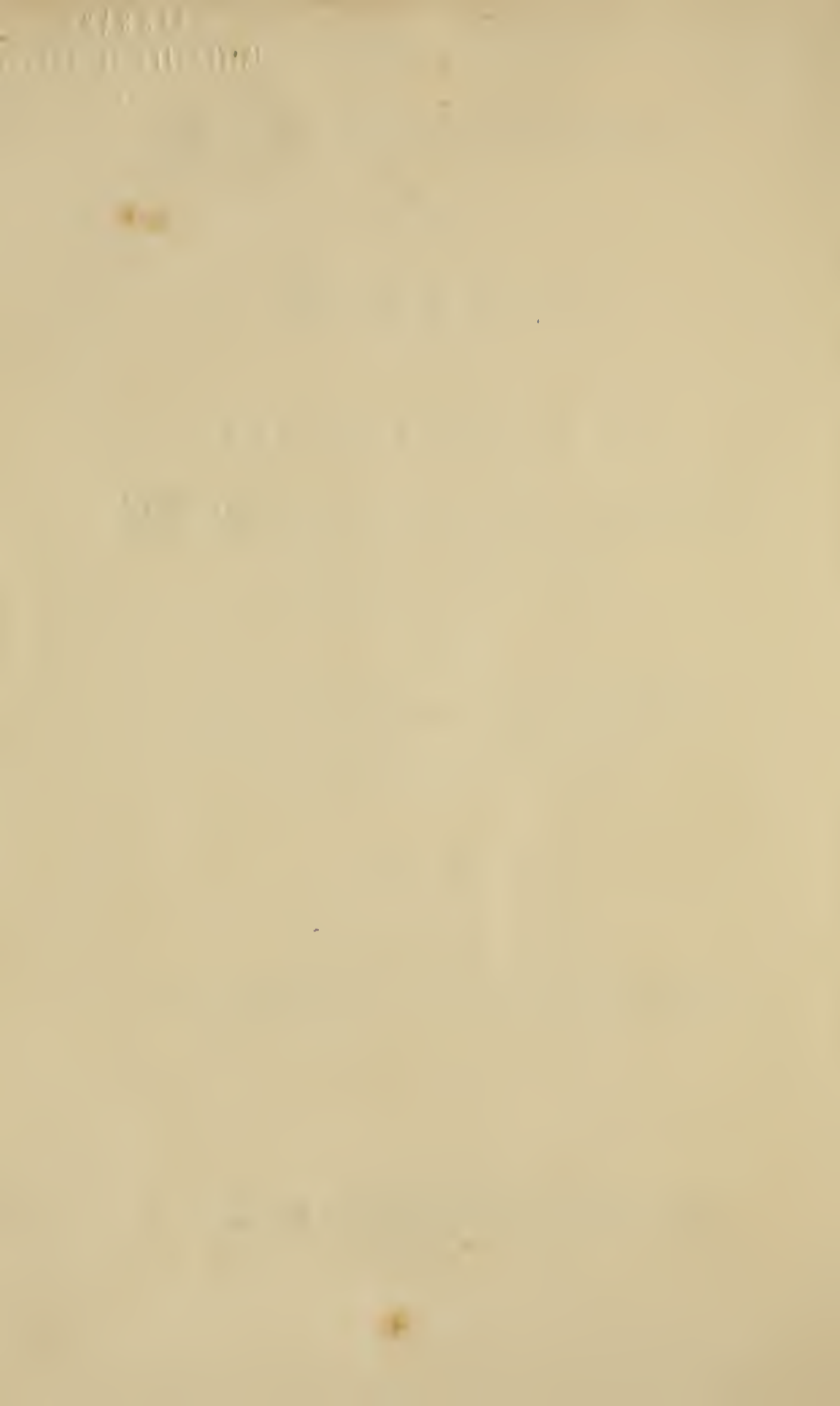




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A S E R M O N

PREACHED IN

The Ruins of Halwarden Church,

AFTER ITS

PARTIAL DESTRUCTION BY FIRE,

ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8<sup>TH</sup>, 1857,

BY

REV. WALDEGRAVE BREWSTER, M.A.

CURATE.

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N E H E M I A H ii. 17.

*“Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.”*

THE Bible, though the word of God, and perhaps chiefly designed to show us the deep things of God, has yet a wonderfully human character about it. God, indeed, speaks there, and that with no doubtful voice; but He speaks, for the most part, in the person of men, and stoops to all the ordinary forms of speech which men employ. And, so far from wearing the somewhat cold and repulsive aspect of a high and abstract theology, or hard and dry morality, the Scriptures abound with the most attractive and pathetic appeals to our understanding and affections, which can be brought to bear upon them. True, as we read, the heavens open, and majestic words of sovereign power, or of solemn warning, fall upon our ears; but mingled with them are the accents of a human love, and we feel in the presence of One like ourselves, at Whose feet we may sit and look upward, if not with perfect and familiar confidence, yet at least with less

trembling awe. And this it is which has made God's word, at all times, the hand-book of the lowly, as well as the learned. Speaking to no particular age or class, but to the whole human race ; and from the depths of man's nature, as well as God's knowledge ; it is no Sybilline mystery, to be opened only in the hour of perplexity : but a bosom friend and associate, whose daily converse improves our mind, as much as it cheers our heart.

Thus only could it become to us what it actually is, and satisfy all our nature's wants : hence its touching parables and engaging histories ; hence its universality and human tenderness. Not only do different portions of it fall in with the ever varying moods and tempers of men, according to their different characters and fortunes, at once correcting and elevating, as well as supplying a means of expression to their thoughts and feelings ; but neither can any circumstance or condition of life befall any number of us, I had almost said any individual, which is not there represented to the full, and in such a manner that we may take pattern from it for the regulation of our own conduct and emotions. Accordingly, we find there not parables only, but portraits ; accurate and most striking representations of what we ourselves might become under every phase of life, with all its shifting joys and sorrows. And these are drawn, as if the Spirit of God in drawing them had sympathized with us, and thrown Himself, so to say, into our ways of thinking ; had been touched with a feeling of our affections ; and striven to reach our hearts by their means.



What simple and affecting scenes of domestic life, for instance, are set before us in the histories of the Patriarchal ages and others of a later period. What a mirror for great and public men in the lives of Moses and Samuel, of Daniel and David. How natural yet how picturesque is the chapter from which the text is taken; and how easily does the greater part of it accommodate itself to our condition here and present state of mind. We are not merely told that Nehemiah was moved by the desolation of his country to return thither and repair its ruins, which would have been enough to record the bare historical fact; but regard has been evidently had to the interest which any one similarly circumstanced might naturally feel in the matter; and we are allowed to observe how the first thought arose in his mind, to accompany him from the moment he determined upon attempting the work, and note all the trials and difficulties he had to encounter in its accomplishment. And this is a part of what I would call the human character of the Bible, that it thus draws us "with the cords of a man," entering into our thoughts, satisfying our curiosity, and consulting our affections; not only narrating what was done, but discovering to us all the feelings and difficulties of those who did it, that we may not want for encouragement or instruction under like circumstances.

What, again, can be more admirable in this respect, or considerate to us, than the whole of this story of Nehemiah? One of the children of the captivity, he had been promoted to be the king's cup-bearer, a post of special dignity and favour. On a certain

occasion some of the Jews came to him, possibly on a matter of business, or perhaps for the express purpose of interesting him in the matter, and told him how his countrymen that had been left in Judea were in great affliction and reproach; and that the wall of Jerusalem was broken down, and the gates thereof burned with fire. Moved by this account, he prays that God would enable him to return to Jerusalem, and repair its ruins. Shortly after the king noticing his sadness and abstraction, when on duty at the palace, inquires the cause of it: and now observe his reply, "Why should not my countenance be sad, when the place of my fathers' sepulchres lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burnt with fire?" Then he asks the king's leave and assistance for the restoration he proposed. Having obtained these he sets out at once on his expedition and arrives at Jerusalem. Then, again, comes one of those touching pictures which in any other composition would be set down as a most exquisite stroke of art; "I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put into my heart to do at Jerusalem: and I went out by night . . . and viewed the walls which were broken down, and the gates which were consumed by fire. So I went up in the night by the brook and viewed the wall, and turned back and entered by the gate of the valley, and returned." And afterwards, he adds, when occasion was given, how he urged all the rulers and the people to help him in the good work he had undertaken: "then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste and the gates thereof are

burnt with fire; come and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.”

Here, then, is a case as nearly parallel to our own at the present moment, as any well can be: and you see something of the way in which, I should suppose, God would have us feel and behave under it. And this is not told us in a hard and unfeeling or merely didactic way, but in that which from its kindly and human touches might seem calculated beyond all others to move our sympathies and secure our hearts.

And here, in a word, is the course we should take. Let us first of all pray honestly and earnestly to God, that He would be with us, and prosper us in our work; let us seek help and assistance from any who are able to contribute what we can not towards it; and let us at once encourage one another, and arise, one and all,—for one and all are interested, and none, not the youngest or poorest, should be deprived of his right to share in such a work as this;—let us, one and all, arise and build up our walls, that the place of our fathers' sepulchres lie no longer waste, and we ourselves be no longer a reproach.

Now, it seems but natural to ask why Nehemiah speaks only of “the place of his fathers' sepulchres,” when David, we cannot doubt, would have spoken of the house or city of the Lord his God? And one reason might very well be, that the person to whom he spoke differed from him in religious opinions; and, therefore, he urged a motive, not, probably, the strongest to his own mind, but such as he thought the other would recognise and allow. For this, indeed, is an argument

which all men admit ; one of those touches of nature, which makes the whole world kin, as we say ; which is understood every where, and might be accepted, when other grounds would prove only so many points of difference. But, beyond a doubt, that which made Nehemiah so anxious about Jerusalem and the Temple, was the persuasion that they were to him the pledge and place of God's presence, and God's promises. In them his fathers had served God, and found favour with Him. To rebuild them was an act of piety which no consideration of personal ease or enjoyment could induce him to forego ; and their restoration was the surest sign that God still owned His people, and would hold gracious intercourse with them. That which drew his soul towards Jerusalem, and made all his yearning thoughts turn thitherward, was a religious rather than a merely natural feeling ; yet, like all religious ties and relations, gathering up the natural into itself and sanctifying them, as Christ in taking our nature did not destroy, but rather deified it. With some of us, also, I trust, the most constraining motive to the love of God's house, will ever be the thought that it is His house ; that there our fathers worshipped, and we ourselves have often found our God in the ordinances of His grace. There He first received us into His family from a fallen world : there sanctified the several relations of home and affection, into which we have since entered : and there, not only do the bodies of our loved ones lie around us, but we know that He watches over their holy and august repose, and will restore them to us in all their perfection when He comes again.

To others who, unhappily, are alienated in feeling, or differ in opinion, and so do not worship with us, it may be only the place of their fathers' sepulchres, that is, may have only such hold upon them as the relationships and ties of this life, though the best of them, can give it; and yet for all that be loved by them with no weak or idle affection. For, short of those which are simply religious, there is, perhaps, no stronger or more sacred feeling than this, even if it is not itself in some sense religious. Certainly it obtains almost universally. Hardly can you find any people, however low or degraded, altogether insensible to it; while it was the only reason once given by a considerable North American tribe, for refusing a very advantageous offer that had been made them for the lands they occupied: "how shall we remove the bones of our fathers?"

In urging this point, then, Nehemiah was probably not stating all those considerations which would have weight with his own mind, nor, perhaps, that which had the greatest, but only that which he thought most likely to be appreciated by the person with whom he had to do. And thus we, too, may be glad to find any common ground, where those who differ from us in other points, can yet meet us, and join with us in building up our walls, which lie waste, and our gates, which have been consumed by fire. No one, indeed, who witnessed the general zeal and activity which was shown on the occasion of our cruel disaster, can think that all regard for these holy places has died out in the minds, even of those who seem ordinarily but too careless and indifferent about such matters. It may not be all we

could wish, or take exactly the shape we should desire ; it may be weak, and require a good deal to call it into action ; but there are evidently provocations which it would not tamely endure. From one motive or another, the attachment of the people of this country to the churches in which their fathers worshipped, even where they themselves have ceased for a time to do so, is greater than many would imagine. There is a sense of property and interest in them, which centuries of traditional feeling and possession conspire to keep alive ; and which, if any serious mischief to them were attempted, would exhibit itself in a manner, and with a vivacity, little, perhaps, anticipated by those who would destroy, or divert them from their proper uses. Many, who do not avail themselves of them as they might, have yet their own value and affection for them ; and would be very unwilling to have them seriously interfered with, or to be deprived of their right of access to them. And, in some cases, it might become apparent that to injure them greatly, would be like touching the apple of their eye, even with those who could hardly have been expected to stand forth in their defence.

If, however, *we* have other and, as we deem, higher and holier motives than these to urge us on, then let us show ourselves more energetic and self-denying ; if we have greater interests at stake, as I do not hesitate to say we have, then let us be ready to make greater sacrifices, to show our sense of them. And let every individual of every class and age be invited to help in this great work ; not merely because

of the amount of pecuniary assistance they may be able to give; but because it is a Christian's birth-right that he should be allowed to take part in every thing which conduces to the glory of God: and let such arrangements be made for this purpose as the circumstances of every person may render most convenient to him. A further advantage I see in such a measure, is, that a person seldom makes a sacrifice for anything, be it what it may, without feeling that the object for which he made it has become proportionately dearer to him. This is the natural effect of any act of sacrifice or self-denial upon the doer: but in the case of religious objects, a supernatural grace, may be reasonably expected to attend upon the action. And thus our duties are blessed to ourselves, as well as their immediate objects. Consider again, how often what we withhold, or spend upon some object of sensual pleasure or worldly ambition, is utterly lost and dissipated; or remains only to become a snare and a curse to us. On the other hand, whatever we give to God has this blessing in it: that it still remains to us as our own, and our works do follow us, in a sense which cannot be true of that which we spend upon ourselves, or any mere object of this life. Nor does the good we thus do end with our own life, but lives on after we are gone hence, to bring others to Him; and continues to accomplish and augment the work for which we devoted it when we are no longer here to forward or direct its operation.

Once more: it may be asked how is it that God can permit the evil mind of one man to do such dishonour to Him, and bring such trouble and distress upon so

many others: and to this we must answer that, though we cannot pretend to see all the designs which God has in permitting such things, yet we can easily conceive how greater honour may redound (Ps. lxxvi. 10.) to Him, and we ourselves may be spiritually improved by the exercise of those religious principles which such an event calls into action; and that all may not be so evil as it seems, even in the sorrow and vexation which it occasions to those who suffer most from it.

There are few, I should hope, in whom the destruction of this Church has not excited some salutary reflections. Many, perhaps, have found that they really have more interest in it than they ever thought they had before; and could not see it destroyed without feelings which they did not know they entertained towards it. Some, by such discovery of their own hearts, may be led to the further question, how it comes about that they have hitherto prized its ordinances so little; and determine, by God's grace, to frequent them more for the future. Others again, I would fain hope, who have hitherto stood aloof from us, may be drawn towards us by the conviction that we have, after all, a depth of common interest in holy things which it is not worth their while to overlook for a few inferior or unimportant differences of opinion; for community in loss and suffering has often a wonderful effect in reconciling differences, and blotting out recollections that hinder unity of sentiment and action.

If, then, any such results as these should follow, and God grant they may, they would materially detract from the amount of evil really inflicted by this great



crime. If, indeed, our loss call any of us to a keener and more religious apprehension of the blessings of public worship; if it awaken in us a more earnest desire to honour God in our substance, or lives and actions; if it help us, in any way, to realize more distinctly our true relation to God and to one another; if it make us more united, more forbearing, more truthful, more religious; then, so far from wondering that God should permit any one person to have the power of inflicting so much loss and inconvenience on so many, we shall the rather wonder to find how much good He can work out of that which, to our eyes, must seem at first sight an unmitigated evil.

And, as such a result is neither impossible nor unnatural, let us endeavour seriously to bring it about. Let us pray God to do it for us, and by us, and in us. Let us entreat Him to draw our hearts more together; to make us more considerate and kind to one another; to help us to feel our own faults, and forget each other's offences in our common loss. As the evil brought upon us is unusual in its extent and enormity; so let us pray Him to enable us to distinguish it as remarkably by the way in which we bear and improve it. Let those who point to the one be compelled to notice the other as pointedly, so that we may be no more a reproach. Let us arise and build again our Holy House, in which our fathers worshipped; and let the common work, and the common interest which we must feel in it, unite and draw us more and more together. Let our earnestness in the matter, too, be so apparent as to be a support and spur to those who undertake the

direction of it. In short, let us imitate those who have already given so liberally of their substance towards it: for though we may never want opportunities of doing good or promoting the glory of God; not often does He make so urgent an appeal to any of us; not often does He bring the question of our readiness to uphold His honour so pressingly home to us.

But, while we thus urge on the restoration of the material fabric, let us not forget that we, also, are described as living stones in a still more glorious structure; of which apostles and prophets are the foundation, and Christ himself the firm and stable corner stone. In this spiritual temple, then, let us arise and build with redoubled energy, that our earthly shrines, in which we now worship, may be more lovely in His sight; and we ourselves, at last, be placed among the stones with which, from day to day, the foundations of the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. xi. 19.) are being garnished.

W. B.

















